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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV KDEM MV

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: POST SUPPORT FOR NDI PROPOSAL

REF: A. COLOMBO 1680

B. COLOMBO 2138

C. 12-08 MAHONEY-WILLET E-MAIL

D. 12-09 MAHONEY-GHORI E-MAIL

1. This is an action request. Please see para 6.

2. The Republic of Maldives, a moderate, pro-Western Muslim nation, is taking its first faltering steps along the path to democratic reform (Ref A). A special Parliament is meeting to consider far-reaching changes, but is moving slowly. In part because of the slow pace of the special Parliament, in June the President issued a decree legalizing political parties. Since then, four political parties have registered in Maldives: the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), the government's DRP (roughly translated as the Maldivian People's Party), the reformist Labor Party, and the Islamic cleric-based Adalath, or Justice Party. The MDP just held its first party congress in Maldives, successfully electing a new leadership (Ref B).

3. Despite this promising beginning, however, multi-party democracy is a novel concept in Maldives, for everyone from voters to government officials to police to the party members themselves. Many Maldivians remain ignorant of each group's proper respective role--a sad fact evidenced by periodic arrests of opposition activists. The problem has been exacerbated by the lack of social studies education at the secondary school level. On numerous occasions, interlocutors from the Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM), members of the opposition, and representatives of civil society groups have lamented to emboffs the lack of public awareness of basic democratic principles and asked for international assistance (Reftel A) to correct this deficit.

4. We understand that the National Democratic Institute (NDI) forwarded a concept paper to the Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) on December 3 proposing a civic education program for Maldives. The Embassy has also forwarded the proposal, via e-mail, to DRL (Refs C and D). NDI proposes to conduct an assessment of civic education needs via workshops and interaction with political leaders, local activists, journalists, and other stakeholders. NDI will present its findings at a public workshop and solicit effective local strategies for disseminating information. Based on the feedback, NDI will design appropriate instructional materials and train local leaders to work with the community. The program will last for one year and cost approximately USD 375,000.

5. In our view, this program has the capacity to strengthen nascent civil society groups while building local capacity to educate the public about civic participation. In addition to building civic awareness, NDI's proposal could also act as a vehicle to promote dialogue between the political parties and the GORM, thereby easing the shift to multi-party democracy. We believe ESF funding to support this initiative would provide one non-partisan tool to help us meet our key MPP goal of promoting democracy in Maldives. In addition, NDI, which conducted a political assessment with GORM cooperation in 2004, has the benefit of a proven and credible track record in Maldives. In fact, the GORM even adopted some recommendations from NDI's 2004 report, including the move to grant legal recognition to political parties and to permit opposition media to function. GORM officials have noted to emboffs that NDI's last assessment was useful, and have requested similar assistance in the future. MDP members, too, have noted that assistance from impartial international bodies such as NDI would be welcome, especially in the current atmosphere of mistrust and animosity between the opposition and the GORM.

6. Maldives is a long-standing friend of the U.S. that is attempting a difficult shift to a system of multi-party democracy. However, GORM officials have expressed concern that during this uncertain transition, Islamic fundamentalism or partisan violence could gain the upper hand, derailing efforts to transform this formerly autocratic state into a viable modern democracy. Helping Maldives peacefully achieve this important but challenging transition serves USG democracy and human rights interests. For now, Maldives remains a place where the U.S. voice carries a great deal of weight. (The marked improvement in prison conditions soon after the Ambassador visited detainees in 2004 is just one example.) In Maldives, a small investment has the potential for a large return, both in terms of tangibly cementing

democratic processes and in generating good will. We believe the NDI proposal offers a low-cost approach that will assist parties in becoming politically mature, spread knowledge about civic processes, and offer a forum for dialogue between divergent groups in Maldivian society. For those reasons, Post fully endorses the NDI proposal and asks that DRL fund the project.

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